

Purdue University Purdue e-Pubs

Purdue University Press Book Previews

Purdue University Press

12-2018

Doing Business in America: A Jewish History

Hasia Diner

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/purduepress_previews



Part of the [Business Commons](#), and the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Diner, Hasia, "Doing Business in America: A Jewish History" (2018). *Purdue University Press Book Previews*. 20.
https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/purduepress_previews/20

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Doing Business in America: A Jewish History

The Jewish Role in American Life

**An Annual Review of the Casden Institute for the
Study of the Jewish Role in American Life**

Doing Business in America: A Jewish History

The Jewish Role in American Life

**An Annual Review of the Casden Institute for the
Study of the Jewish Role in American Life**

Volume 16

Steven J. Ross, *Editor*
Hasia R. Diner, *Guest Editor*
Lisa Ansell, *Associate Editor*

Published by the Purdue University Press for
the USC Casden Institute for the Study of the
Jewish Role in American Life

© 2018

University of Southern California
Casden Institute for the
Study of the Jewish Role in American Life.
All rights reserved.

Production Editor, Marilyn Lundberg

Cover photo supplied by Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c18470>.

Men pulling racks of clothing on busy sidewalk in Garment District, New York City.
World Telegram & Sun photo by Al Ravenna.

Cloth ISBN: 978-1-55753-836-9

ePDF ISBN: 978-1-61249-559-0

ePUB ISBN: 978-1-61249-560-6

Published by Purdue University Press
West Lafayette, Indiana
www.press.purdue.edu
pupress@purdue.edu

Printed in the United States of America.

For subscription information,
call 1-800-247-6553

Contents

FOREWORD	vii
EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION	ix
<u>CHAPTER 1</u> <i>Hasia R. Diner</i> American Jewish Business: At the Street Level	 1
<u>CHAPTER 2</u> <i>Allan M. Amanik</i> Common Fortunes: Social and Financial Gains of Jewish and Christian Partnerships in Eighteenth-Century Transatlantic Trade	 25
<u>CHAPTER 3</u> <i>Rebecca Kobrin</i> Jewish Immigrant Bankers, New York Real Estate, and American Finance, 1870–1914	 49
<u>CHAPTER 4</u> <i>Julia Phillips Cohen</i> Far Away Moses & Company: An Ottoman Jewish Business between Istanbul and the United States	 77
<u>CHAPTER 5</u> <i>Jonathan Karp</i> The Roots of Jewish Concentration in the American Popular Music Business, 1890–1945	 123
<u>CHAPTER 6</u> <i>Niki C. Lefebvre</i> “Sometimes It Is Like I Am Sitting on a Volcano”: Retailers, Diplomats, and the Refugee Crisis, 1933–1945	 145
<u>CHAPTER 7</u> <i>Diane Vecchio</i> Max Moses Heller: Patron Saint of Greenville’s Renaissance	 181
<u>CHAPTER 8</u> <i>Matt Garcia</i> “A Just and Righteous Man”: Eli Black and the Transformation of United Fruit	 213
ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS	227
ABOUT THE USC CASDEN INSTITUTE	231

Foreword

How have Jews, especially American Jews, conducted business over the past several centuries? How has their Judaism affected the ways in which they did business? These are two of the main questions explored in Volume 10 of the Casden Annual Review. Examining the history of American Jewish business at both the “street level” and across the transatlantic, our guest editor Hasia Diner has compiled a series of essays that investigate the ways in which Jews, often in concert with Christian partners, shaped a variety of business practices in the United States and Europe. Taken collectively, these essays, as Diner explains, help us understand “the deep bond between the business of Jews and the business of Jewish life.”

Cutting across several centuries, volume contributors explore a wide range of topics: Jewish-Christian partnerships in the eighteenth-century transatlantic trade; the interactions of Jewish merchants and Jewish customers on Jewish streets of Baltimore, Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, New York, and a variety of twentieth-century American cities; how Jews transformed real estate and financial markets between 1870 and 1914, and how they changed popular music in the United States between the 1890s and 1945. Turning to the traumatic years of the 1930s and 1940s, our essayists describe how Jewish retailers in the United States and Europe responded to the refugee crisis between 1933 and 1945, and how one Austrian Jew fleeing Hitler’s Europe drew on his Judaism to transform the textile business in Greenville, South Carolina, and later, while serving as mayor, the city itself.

A key denominator among the essays is the way in which they reveal how a commitment to Judaism and Jewish values shaped business practices across several centuries. Whether it was fulfilling a communal sense of obligation (*hachnassat orchim*) or a commitment to healing the world (*tikkun olam*), being a Jew in business contained a number of traditional expectations guided by the Torah and by longstanding ethical and religious values. This was especially true in the case of Eli Black, whose early training as a rabbi guided

his subsequent efforts as a CEO to transform United Fruit into a more socially responsible business.

I wish to thank our guest editor Hasia Diner, the Paul S. and Sylvia Steinberg Professor of American Jewish History at New York University, for her stellar work. I also wish to thank Marilyn Lundberg Melzian for her tireless and superb work as our volume's copy-editor. Finally, I wish to dedicate this volume to both Stanley Gold and Bruce Ramer, two pillars of the Los Angeles Jewish business community who continue to demonstrate how the commitment to hard work and philanthropy can truly make this world a better place.

Steven J. Ross

Myron and Marian Casden Director

Professor of History

Editorial Introduction

by Hasia R. Diner

The often misquoted sentence, offered by President Calvin Coolidge in 1925, offers a way to introduce the topic of this volume, the role of Jews in the business life of America. Coolidge supposedly said, “the business of America is business,” and that too would have been a fine segue into this complex and enormous topic. But in reality, in the speech he gave to the Society of American Newspaper Editors on January 17, he declared, in support of the role of the press in America’s free market economy, “the chief business of the American people is business.” That works even better.

Most Americans, across the centuries and the geographic breadth of the nation, met Jews in the realm of business. Regardless of race, class, or geography Americans encountered Jews, whether immigrants or those with longer roots in the nation, as the people from whom they bought goods of one kind or another. Jewish peddlers and shopkeepers, operators of urban pushcarts, the proprietors of modest dry goods stores and princes of large palatial department stores peopled the American landscape and essentially provided the human links between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors. Through the realm of commerce, Jews made an impress on American life. In most cases their distinctively Jewish last names appeared on the windows and awnings of the stores which lined so many Main Streets and which sprang up in poor and middle class shopping districts.

Commerce also underlay the web of relationships which held Jewish communities together. Jews for the most part not only prayed with other Jews, recreated with them, married them, and were buried with them, but they also bought and sold to each other and Jewish business districts gave Jewish neighborhoods their visible and distinctive characteristics. Stores of one kind or

another in which Jews encountered each other as buyers and sellers of goods helped shape community relations and those who made money from business, of whatever kind, served as the patrons of Jewish communal institutions, often assuming that they could dictate policy by virtue of their financial largesse to the *kahal*, the community.

Business as such both positioned Jews outward as they faced the larger society and inward as it shaped much of the tone of communal life. How and why did these kinds of encounters take place in America? What did it mean for Jews and for Americans? What role did America's orientation to business, embodied in the Coolidge quote, serve to draw Jewish immigrants to the United States and how did it in turn structure the kinds of relationships which developed between the small Jewish minority—which never constituted more than four or five percent of the nation—and the many Americans whom they did business? How did Jewish enclaves pivot around the world of ethnic business?

The essays which follow expose a mere sliver of this enormous topic. The larger detailed history of Jews and American business remains to be written. The historian Derek Penslar in his *Shylock's Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe* of 2001 challenged historians of the Jews to not shy away from contemplating the historic significance of the nexus between Jews and commerce in their research. Acknowledging that critics of the Jews, those who spewed forth anti-Jewish rhetoric, often cited the Jews' proclivity to business as evidence of their degeneracy, using it as a way to stir up hatred against the Jews, Penslar asked scholars to not worry about the sensitivity of the topic. Rather he told them to pursue it.

While this landmark book focused on Europe, America may be an equally, or maybe more, appropriate setting to uncover this history. After all, much of the Jewish migration to America, from the eighteenth century onward, a migration of millions from Europe and also the Ottoman Empire, followed the flowering of business opportunities. It more than anyplace else offered the lure of business to Jews in search of new places of residence, free from restrictions on movement and the ability to earn a comfortable living. In a provocative book, *Jewish Immigrant Entrepreneurship in New York and London*, a book which received relatively little notice, the British historian Andrew Godley noted also in 2001, that east European Jews who went to London did less well economically and moved into self-employment less often than their peers who opted for America's largest city. Godley attributed the disparity to the nature of the New York, and the American, economy, one which took root in a culture which supported, stimulated, and valorized business as the work of the nation.

So, too, a set of essays, edited by Rebecca Kobrin, aptly entitled, *Chosen Capital*, explores the many ways Jews encountered American capitalism and how many of them took as their subject the role of business in that.

The handful of snapshots that appear in the pages that follow span American and American Jewish history, extending from the eighteenth century into the late twentieth. They focus on such diverse fields of business as international shipping, rock-and-roll music, community-level banking, textile manufacturing, and more. They look at the work business did in structuring relationships between Jews and others, and the way it cemented interactions within the Jewish community.

The larger history of Jews and American business waits to be written. Indeed a whole subfield within American Jewish history which takes business seriously deserves to come into being and perhaps this volume might stimulate scholars to turn their attention to the world of commerce. Similarly historians of American business have paid scant attention to the role of Jews in the shaping of the business world, which the laconic president, Calvin Coolidge, opined constituted, “the chief business of the American people.” It would certainly be worth their attention to think about the ways Jews carved out a particular niche for themselves in the American economy and how the businesses they created played a role in the economic life of the nation. This book may play a role in fostering such scholarly explorations.

JEWES AND BUSINESS: A DIASPORA STORY

This book takes America as its canvass, but the history of Jews and business in American forms only one, though important, chapter in a longer history which extends back centuries and involves much of the experience of the Jewish people in their many diaspora homes. The dispersion of the Jews from their ancient homeland at the beginning of the Common Era provides a crucial underpinning to the deep and widely practiced connection between Jews and commerce.

That history has pivoted around the centrality of trade as their *métier*. While in the ancient world, in their homeland, they had cultivated fields, grown crops, tended vineyards, and grazed flocks, details so vividly described in the pages of the Hebrew Bible, in their vast and long diaspora existence, they rarely engaged in these occupations. Commerce, the buying and selling of

things, consumed most of their energies, although many also made a living as artisans. Those artisans, however, variously worked for Jewish merchants who sold their goods, or the craftspeople doubled as business people who also made a profit from the things they made.

Whether they sold produce grown by non-Jews who lived nearby, dealt in lumber, fur, or minerals, or if they traded in goods produced in far-off corners of the world, mattered less than the fact that wherever they went they relied on global Jewish networks for credit and goods. Whether they operated at the top echelons of these networks as wealthy importers or at the very bottom, as financiers or as on-the-road peddlers, horse traders, or sellers of old clothes, their commercial histories cannot be disassociated from diasporic ties and experiences. The Jews' ability to activate intra-communal networks facilitated their decisions, undertaken across time and space, to pick up, leave for someplace else where they would essentially do the same kind of work, albeit selling to new customers who spoke different languages, yet who still had need of the Jews' commercial skills, their human capital.¹

Jewish life, on multiple continents lived in a plethora of languages, fostered a commitment to trade, and conversely, trade underlay the basic patterns of how and where Jews lived. The two, trade and the Jews, cannot be disentangled, or as put by the Polish Jewish historian Simon Dubnov in 1928, the two have always been "so entwined . . . they cannot be divided." Unlike the histories of "other European peoples, Jewish economic history involves not only 3,000 years," but took place across the canvas of "the whole world" (180–83).

The riddle of Jewish trade, of all kinds, whether peddling or in a fixed place, the question why so many of them gravitated to trade has puzzled scholars and commentators, both detractors and defender of the Jews, for centuries. Did, they have asked, Jews trade because they suffered disabilities all over the world, which barred them from engaging in that most fundamental and normal activity by which most human beings "earned their bread," namely agriculture? Did, particularly starting in the medieval period, the exclusion of Jews from the guilds relegate them to commerce, either commerce in fixed shops or commerce plied on the roads, with Jewish merchants carrying their misery and goods on their backs?²

Additionally, the long history of Jewish forced migrations which, commencing even before the onset of the Common Era, has been enlisted as an explanation of the fact that wherever and whenever they lived, Jews turned to trade in one form or another. As perpetual outsiders, always strangers and different than the autarkic people of the places where they resided, they could

not assume that they would be able to remain in place, unchallenged in their right of residence. After all, they had once lived and even thrived in Spain, the Rhine Valley, the south of France, and England, four places from which they experienced painful expulsions. Those expulsions as well as others less famous conditioned them to cast their lot with trade, investing in assets that they could carry with them to wherever they went next and to hone skills transferrable from one place to another.

Even if not actually expelled, they endured sporadic waves of violence, massacres like those which convulsed Europe at the time of the Crusades and in the middle of the seventeenth century, and this too pushed Jews to seek new places that seemed to offer both greater security and enhanced prospects for making a living. Intuiting that they might have to pick up and leave a place quickly, the logic runs, conditioned Jews to turn to trade, something they could do anywhere. It constituted their movable asset.

These negative explanations of the Jewish proclivity towards trade assume that Jews would have, if circumstances or the law had allowed, become farmers and lived like all the majority of the world's population, tilling the soil and building a life that took its basic structure from the needs and rhythm of the agricultural life. But other more positive explanations have been enlisted to puzzle out the origins of the Jewish encounter with trade. These positive explanations, and not positive in the sense of good or correct, have rather asserted that something about the Jews themselves facilitated their embrace of trade. The Jews, according to this way of thinking, had a nose for business.

Some commentators, many of whom can be considered anti-Semites, presented biological or instinctive explanations. The innate Jewish character included a compulsion to trade, and with that a proclivity to cheat, and to do anything for profit. Their greed and materialism inspired their economic activities, from the peddler trudging the road to the financiers who controlled the world economy, as presented so graphically and grotesquely in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This racialized analysis in its extreme culminated in the writings of scientific racists of the late nineteenth century, which in turn received their most elaborate and horrific embodiments in Nazi rhetoric and policy.

Even if not categorically racist, many of the foundational figures of the field of sociology and political economy saw the Jew as fundamentally business-obsessed whether because of his religion, which allowed him to treat non-Jews differently than his own people, or his basic nature, which some writers attributed to his more highly developed intellect, a factor which facilitated business transactions. Karl Marx, the most complicated of these, in his "The

Jewish Question” of 1844 suggested, “Let us look at the actual. . . Jew of our time . . . the Jew of everyday life. What is the Jew’s foundation in our world? Material necessity, private advantage. What is the object of the Jew’s worship in this world? Usury/huckstering. What is his worldly god? Money . . . Money is the zealous god of Israel.” As to peddlers, Marx did not ignore them. The Jewish peddler with “his goods and his counter on his back,” thought only of making money . . . the bill of exchange is the real god of the Jews” (quoted in Arkin). With a bit more subtlety, Werner Sombart in 1911, in *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, reiterated how Judaism as a religious system, undergirded by its canonical texts of Torah and Talmud, enabled the Jew, “*homo Judaeus*” to transform himself into “*homo capitalisticus*.”³

The history of Jews and trade could be perhaps better understood in terms of their long history as a migratory people. Millennia of global migrations liberated the Jews from the limitations and rigors of farming and allowed them to trade. Not tied down to fields and vineyards, they could see and seize new opportunities which allowed them to move. This point constitutes the starting point for historian Yuri Slezkine’s 2004, *The Jewish Century*, in which he labels the Jews, their engagement with commerce, its portability, and the ease with which they migrated, as “mercurians,” as the world’s best migrants. To Slezkine, the synergy between business, migrations, and the Jews, made them the standard bearers of modernity.

Those migrations created vast Jewish networks across continents rendering the Jews a world-wide people whose communal contacts made it possible for them to secure credit and gain access to goods, through Jewish channels, regardless of where the individual Jewish trader may have lived. That transnational Jewish world, embedded in religious practice, undergirded by education and literacy, linked by the idea of collective responsibility, and the ties of trade in turn stimulated linguistic flexibility, which also shaped Jewish economic history (Muller; Karp; Israel; Botticini and Eckstein).

Because of their centuries’ long immersion in world trade, Jews stood poised to take advantage, and indeed help shape, modernity and the emergence of capitalism. Business demanded of them a need to be aware of new markets, new products, and new tastes which all had to come together to inspire women and men to want to consume items they had never had before. Whether luxury goods, textiles, jewelry, furs, hides, watches, eye glasses, coffee, among others, Jewish traders depended on the expansion of markets and the accumulation of capital. Freed from a commitment to any land—England, France, Westphalia, Podolia—or any plot of land within some political jurisdiction, not chained to

landowners like the serfs, then peasants, they had much to gain by following their hunches that told them that some new place offered opportunities for a better future, a better field of operation for them to do what they had long been doing, buying and selling. For many scholars, this long history helps not only contextualize the deep history of Jews and trade, but goes a long way to understanding their relationship to capitalism in the modern period (Chazan).

Counter to the notion that Jews turned to trade because anti-Jewish restrictions prevented them from doing anything else, it in fact liberated them from agriculture, from its unpredictability and its rootedness in a single and fixed place. Likewise, in numerous times and places, trade actually protected the Jews. Jews brought goods to towns, regions, principalities, and nations, enriching the coffers of the state, and extending credit and this in most places ensured that the Jews would be allowed to stay, even if they had no formal rights. Jews as merchants often played a crucial role in mediating between the poor agriculturalists who did the basic work of the society and the landowners. Jewish peddlers exchanged goods for agricultural products and engineered the transactions between fields and marketplaces, relying on a chain of Jewish middle-men who facilitated each rung of the operation. This too, while at many times inspiring hatred and resentment against the Jews or the particular Jewish business person, made possible the basic operation of the local economy. The Jew who brought the wheat or flax to market, who negotiated the sale price and provided the peasant farmers with goods, occupied a crucial niche in maintaining the status quo. The Emperor Franz in 1795, the august ruler of the Austro-Hungarian Empire who issued an edict of toleration towards his Jewish subjects, lauded in particular the very humble Jewish peddlers, the lowest on the ladder of Jewish business endowing them with a privileged status:

Since peddling promotes and multiplies the more rapid trade of manufactured products . . . for the benefit of the producers, and also creates the advantage for the greater part of consumers that they may obtain some wares more cheaply than in stores, and given that each individual is free to buy from the peddler or merchant, peddling thus belongs among the useful trades and livelihoods; thus one does not put an end to it because of abuses, which creep into all human interactions, but rather only the abuses are to be dealt with. (Penslar 33)

Those with political power recognized the Jews' crucial place in this system, protecting at least the useful Jews from expulsion and harassment. Not discounting or diminishing the history of expulsions or dismissing the reality

that as Jews in deeply religious Christian and Muslim societies they faced a kind of omnipresent danger, in most cases and at most times, Jews did not find themselves cast out and wandering the roads in search of some safe place to live. Trade, whether high end or low end, provided some modicum of security to an otherwise insecure existence (Jersch-Wenzel 95).

Explanations which see trade as liberating for the Jews rather than as the negative result of discrimination have also emphasized the absence of any distrust of business and material acquisition within their religious system. Their holy books which set the terms of Jewish law accepted business dealings as normal but regulated them to soften the worst abuses which could result from individuals pursuing profit. They prayed on their holy days for the blessings not only of health and well-being, but of *parnassah*, literally business.

Jews traded also because they could. Judaism mandated universal male literacy in Hebrew and not coincidentally trade required the ability to read and write, as well as to do sums, keep account books, calculate percentages, even know something about world geography. Throughout the Jewish world, over the course of centuries, young people grew up with trade all around them. They breathed in the idea, almost from the air around them, learning from life itself, that business defined everyday life itself, and since trade depended upon numeracy and literacy, upon linguistic flexibility, young people entered adulthood knowing with a degree of certainty that they would trade. To them, the circumstances of the Jews made business seem just the normal and expected thing to do, whether they entered the field among the lucky few at the higher echelons or the more typical masses who inhabited the lower ones, including the peddlers. The reality that trade demanded literacy and that the Jewish tradition did so also further cemented the bond between trade and Jewish life.

Both their religion and their livelihood pivoted on access to the written word. These two needs for literacy conjoined with each other. Other matters of Jewish life fostered trade, and conversely trade sustained Jewish ties and commitments. Judaism mandated that Jews provide *hachnassat orchim*, hospitality for visitors. It required that they as individuals or through the aegis of their organized communities had to make available places for Jewish wayfarers to lodge, partake of kosher food, and spend Sabbath and holidays. Jewish merchants in pursuit of goods and customers in need of such services found Jewish communities as hospitable waystations on the roads of business.

Trade in fact brought Jews from one region into the homes, synagogues, and communal institutions of others, with the bonds of Jewishness

far surpassing the potential suspicion of strangers. Jews in one place, as they hosted Jewish merchants in their time off the road, developed an understanding that Jewishness overshadowed differences in terms of place of origin or dialect. Business essentially forged the Jews' global chain of belonging (Shulvass).

Jewish communities took their shape from trade, in as much as all credit came from within the Jewish world. The well-off gave credit and goods to the poor merchants who in turn extended credit to even smaller operatives, down to the peddlers. The larger Jewish merchants depended upon the more humble ones to sell their goods, and Jewish enclaves functioned as virtual lending institutions, making religious life, collective identity, and business dealings tightly intertwined. When Jews moved either as individuals, families, or as full communities, they turned to the Jews already resident in these places to facilitate their adjustment, to help them settle in, and not coincidentally, to get started in business. In Europe, furthermore, ties of trade, from the top to the bottom, depended on a common language, and from approximately the year 1000, Yiddish in its many variants served as the Jews' *lingua franca*. Hebrew also came to be used by Jews as the language of contracts. Trade, like belief and adherence to the Judaic system, held the Jews together.

While trade united Jews together, it also stimulated intra-Jewish class antagonisms. The concentration of Jews in business, and in particular in a relatively narrow swathe of business, meant that Jews essentially competed with each other. Which peddler had access to the best stash of goods? Which shopkeepers could get their hands on the newest items with which to entice customers? Within families, offspring rivaled each other for an opportunity to get started and make a living in the exact same line of work.

This competition became particularly acute by the latter part of the eighteenth century as the size of the Jewish population skyrocketed, while the first stirrings of industrialization and economic modernization challenged the Jews' long standing economic role. As the poor merchants, whether peddlers or stationery ones, relied upon the same merchants to provide goods and credit and while Jewish law required that they not encroach on each other's livelihood, the fact of being in the same enterprise involved a competitive reality that made for communal tension.

Also, as a few Jews operated businesses which did spectacularly well, and others, in increasing numbers, languished at the bottom, resentment spread from top down and bottom up, challenging Jewish unity. Describing seventeenth century Italy—but it could be applied to other situations—one historian has noted, “two different sorts of Jewry-laws existed, one for the privileged

loan bankers and one for the *universita' degli ebrei*, a miserable proletariat of peddlers, second-hand dealers, woolcarders and ragpickers" (Wischnitzer xix).

Regardless of the explanation for the Jewish embrace of commerce, it had been a fact of life for them. Certainly some Jews did make a living in crafts and artisans always took their place in Jewish communities. But most of the artisans sold their products directly to the public, erasing the difference between commerce and craft. But even with that, the balance, between trade and craft, favored trade. Within the context of trade, peddling functioned as part of an integrated Jewish economy which descended from wealthy importers and international merchants down multiple steps with the peddlers as merely the bottom of that hierarchy.

JEWES AND THE BUSINESS OF AMERICA

Jews came to America with business opportunities on their mind. It served as the powerful magnet which drew them in and even those who knew that their first American steps would take place as sweat shop operatives and workers in garment factories still came as a result of business. The massive transfer of the Jewish population, mostly from Europe to America came with the dynamic development of the American economy and the mushrooming of business opportunities. In the century from the 1820s to the 1920s one-third of the Jewish population of Europe crossed some national border to find newer and better homes. About 85% of them chose the United States, and also its predecessor colonies, bringing these millions of Jews from places of low productivity and stagnant development to the most dynamic economy in the world.

America from its earliest days until well into the twentieth century experienced a constant and chronic labor shortage, set amidst the vast natural resources waiting to be exploited. This reality undergirded the entire European immigrant flood to America, including that of the Jews. And like all other Europeans Jews left settled places where economic opportunities did not exist for them and opted for America where they did. While the American Jewish communal narrative has emphasized outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in Europe, the pogroms in particular, as the engines which drove the population transfer, analytically the more mundane story of a group of people, Jews, who sought out places to live better, and ultimately live well, has greater validity. In this draw of America, the world of business loomed large.

The American-Jewish economic fit reflected the long history of Jews and commerce and the long-observed, and often deprecated, American proclivity towards material acquisition. Few foreign commentators on American life failed to notice the desire of its people to acquire and own stuff. Americans, observed from the early nineteenth century onward, seemed to want more and what they wanted had to be bigger and better. No real tradition of asceticism ran through American life, much to the chagrin of a handful of intellectual, ideological, and sometimes religious critiques of American acquisitiveness.

If they wanted more pots and pans, dresses and shoes, table cloths and towels, someone had to provide it. In nearly every period of American Jewish history we can see a confluence between American material needs, or better, wants, and Jewish economic skills, the ability of Jews to sell to Americans the things they wanted.

Let me briefly sketch out three eras in American Jewish history as they reveal this symbiotic relationship. In the earliest decades, in the eighteenth century, the British colonies of North America and the Caribbean existed in large measure to facilitate international trade. Jews, both the Sephardim who actually became the minority by the 1740s, with their roots in the Iberian Peninsula and the Netherlands, and their far flung family members in the “Levant,” as well as the larger group of Ashkenazim from Poland who operated at the lower and domestic end of this international commercial network, helped do what the colonial authorities wanted, extract profit. Commerce between the “mother country” and the colonies as well as the importation of slaves from Africa, created a highly lucrative and integrated Atlantic world of trade, designed to benefit Britain. Jews, with their global Jewish trading connections that spanned Europe, the Mediterranean basin, and around the Atlantic, while small in number, helped make possible what we used to call the “triangular trade route.” While not alone in fueling the development of the Americas, they used their Jewish contacts to help ensure that goods and capital moved from one point to the next. Jews in the American colonies gained acceptance in the eyes of both colonial officials and the vastly larger non-Jewish population for their contribution to both the Empire’s riches and the usefulness which the colonies could show to London-based officials.

From the middle of the nineteenth century into the earliest years of the twentieth as the American white population moved westward to the remote and least settled areas, families and communities of “settlers” articulated a desire for cosmopolitan goods. The westward movement of Americans across the continent made it possible for the commercial interests to gain access to vast

stretches of “uninhabited” land which could be farmed, mined, and logged. The nation’s penetration of the hinterlands, romantically and jingoistically, described as “manifest destiny,” required capital, and it required women and men willing to work the land, fell the forests, dig the mines, lay the railroad tracks, and the like. It also needed intermediaries to bring to these people the kinds of “stuff” that made it bearable for them to live in these undeveloped places.

Some central and east European Jews met America on the shifting peddlers’ frontier. Tens of thousands of Jewish men, well-acquainted with itinerant merchandising after centuries of life in Europe, turned their long time economic niche into an American opportunity. The Jewish peddlers, many of whom graduated to becoming the owners of Jewish dry goods stores in the small towns which served the hinterlands, the Jewish retailers in the big cities who outfitted the peddlers, the Jewish owners of scrap and junk yards, and the Jewish tailors who sewed the clothes which then traveled in the peddlers’ wagons and ended up on the bodies of rural dwellers, made up a Jewish economy that served the basic needs of the expanding United States. While behind this historic drama lay many complicated economic and political relationships, on the surface what transpired involved a marriage between Americans’ desire for consumer goods—buttons, thread, needles, curtains, eye glasses, mirrors, pictures and picture frames, fabric and ready-to-wear clothing—and the willingness of Jews to pick up the familiar peddler’s pack and venture out to pretty much anywhere they could find paying customers.

So many of the Jews who began as peddlers graduated to becoming settled merchants who in turn met their non-Jewish neighbors, regardless of race, religion, place or origin, or language, across their store counters, where they made sales, exchanged mundane pleasantries and helped create America’s retail life. In white neighborhoods and in African-American ones, Jews sold stuff. In Irish, Polish, and other enclaves peopled by immigrants from central and eastern Europe, stores popped up with Jewish proprietors satisfying the needs of the local residents. Throughout the American South, for example, people referred unselfconsciously to “the Jew store,” and if they meant it pejoratively or not, they daily made the connection between Jews and business (Suberman).

By the 1860s yet another match took place between American economic needs and Jewish history, generated by business. The expansion of the garment industry which began with the invention of the sewing machine at nearly the same moment in time as the Civil War, coincided with a series of linked, but independent developments, which transformed not just America but European Jewry. Late nineteenth century urbanization resulted in the movement of

hundreds of thousands of young women out of rural areas and off their family farms into the cities. They flooded into industrial and white collar jobs in the years before marriage. This took place simultaneously with the rise of the advertising industry, the emergence of “style” as something within the reach of working class women, new sanitary standards, all of which led to the reality that by the end of the nineteenth century the garment industry took off as one of the most dynamic sectors of the American economy.

Factories, heavily although not exclusively housed in New York, sewed the garments which clothed women and men around America and the world. The ready-to-wear clothing industry spread its dresses and blouses, shirtwaists, hats, and undergarments around the nation and the world fueling American economic development. In this sector Jews as the employers, that is, the business owners, and workers found, and helped create, their special niche. Jews in Europe had long made a living by means of the needle, but in America, they could use that lowly skill to create a vast enterprise which did nothing less than clothe Americans and others, employ in massive numbers successive streams of Jewish immigrants, as well as others, both women and men.

In addition this field with its relatively low need for start-up capital provided to Jews one of the few means by which immigrant industrial laborers could move into the ranks of the employing class. The almost iconic story of the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of March 25, 1911 stands as a representative moment in the particular history of the garment business as a Jewish enterprise. The two owners of the factory, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris both had immigrated to America from Russian Poland and had begun their American careers, like so many others, as sweatshop laborers. These two managed to scrape together enough money to first open their sweatshop and then move up to owning the largest, most modern factory in the trade, the Triangle Company, housed in the Asch Building. While the details of the fire, the details of the harrowing fate of the victims, the responses of the state of New York, and the powerful words and actions of the union, its women leaders in particular, are enshrined in the annals of American history, the story focuses less on the fact of this as a Jewish business story. Two immigrant Jews went into their peoples’ business and by a quite conventional Jewish route made the journey from employee to employer, from laborer to business owner.

These three examples, the many others which cannot be encompassed in either this brief introductory essay or even in the articles which appear in this edited volume, should make it abundantly clear that the business of America involved the Jews as well and the efflorescence of business opportunities

exercised a powerful stimulant to the great Jewish migration across the Atlantic. The history of Jewish business in America not only transformed Jewish life but touched the lives of so many Americans.

Let me offer a word of thanks to Professor Steven Ross of the University of Southern California and the Director of the Myron and Marion Casden Institute for the Study of the Role of Jews in American Life for inviting me to conceptualize and edit this volume. Working with him and with Lisa Deborah Ancel and Marilyn Lundberg Melzian, also of USC, who shepherded me and the authors through this process, has been a pleasure. I also want to thank the wonderful group of historians whose works appear here, who agreed to contribute to this volume, which I hope will take a place of pride alongside the other volumes produced by the Casden Institute.

Notes

1. The economic history of the modern Jewish diaspora can be seen in Diner; Teller and Kobrin.
2. Jews clearly functioned as craftsmen as well as traders and a literature exists from the nineteenth century onward trying to prove how artisanship equaled trade as the focus of Jewish economic activity. Most of these craftsmen, however, also sold their goods either directly to the public or, more often, relied on Jewish merchants, including peddlers to get those goods to customers. As such, artisanship did not exist independent of trade.
3. For excerpts from these see Perry and Schweitzer 75–89; see also Mayer.

Works Cited

- Arkin, Marcus. *Aspects of Jewish Economic History*. Jewish Publication Society, 1975.
- Botticini, Maristella, and Zvi Eckstein. *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70–1492*. Princeton Univ., 2012.
- Chazan, Robert. *Reassessing Jewish Life in Medieval Europe*. Cambridge Univ., 2010.
- Diner, Hasia R. *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way*. Yale Univ., 2016.
- Dubnov, Simon. "Voss Felt in Unser Economisher Geshikhte." *Shriftn far Economic un Statistic*, edited by Jacob Leschinsky, vol. 2, YIV, Economic and Statistical Branch, 1928.
- Godley, Andrew. *Jewish Immigrant Entrepreneurship in New York and London, 1880–1914*. Palgrave, 2001.
- Israel, Jonathan. *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism: 1550–1750*. Clarendon, 1985.
- Jersch-Wenzel, Stefi. "Jewish Economic Activity in Early Modern Times." *In and Out of the Ghetto: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*, R. Po-Chia Hsia and Hartmut Lehmann, Cambridge Univ., 1995, pp. 91–101.
- Karp, Jonathan. *The Politics of Jewish Commerce: Economic Ideology and Emancipation in Europe, 1638–1848*. Cambridge Univ., 2008.
- Kobrin, Rebecca, editor. *Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter with American Capitalism*. Rutgers Univ., 2012.
- Mayer, Gustav. "German Socialism and Jewish Emancipation." *Jewish Social Studies* vol. 1, no. 4, Oct, 1939, pp. 409–22.
- Mendelsohn, Adam. *The Rag Race: How Jews Sewed Their Way to Success in America and the British Empire*. New York Univ., 2014.
- Muller, Jerry Z. *Capitalism and the Jews*. Princeton Univ., 2010.
- Penslar, Derek. *Shylock's Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe*. Univ. of California, 2001.
- Perry, Marvin, and Frederick M. Schweitzer. *Antisemitic Myths: A Historical and Contemporary Anthology*. Indiana Univ., 2008.
- Shulvass, Moses. *From East to West: The Westward Migration of Jews from Eastern Europe during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Wayne State Univ., 1971.
- Slezkine, Yuri. *The Jewish Century*. Princeton Univ., 2004.
- Suberman, Stella. *The Jew Store*. Algonquin Books at Chapel Hill, 1998.
- Teller, Adam, and Rebecca Kobrin, editors. *Purchasing Power: The Economics of Modern Jewish History*. Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2015.
- Wischnitzer, Mark. *A History of Jewish Crafts and Guilds*. Jonathan David, 1965.